

Meeting the Challenges of Quality Assurance and Accountability in the new National Curriculum Statement (NCS)

at Grade 12 – level in South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa's democratic government inherited a divided and unequal system of education. The curriculum of South Africa and that of Gauteng Province has, since 1995, undergone radical transformation. A range of Legislation and curriculum policies have been developed, which are underpinned by transformation principles, namely access, redress, quality and equity. At its broadest level, our education and its curriculum express our idea of ourselves as a society and our vision as to how we see the new form of society being realised through our children and learners.

This paper therefore focuses on the principles underpinning the examination system, the challenges relating to the National Senior Certificate assessment system and the support strategies that are used to improve assessment quality and learner performance.

2. BACKGROUND

In October 1997, the Statement of the National Curriculum for grades R – 9 was published and was introduced to schools in 1998 as Curriculum 2005 (C2005). Its implementation was reviewed by the Ministerial committee in 2000 and the report thereof was presented on 31 March 2000. As per the recommendations of the Ministerial committee the curriculum was strengthened and streamlined, hence the Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Schools) became policy in 2002. The first

implementation date of NCS was in 2004 in Foundation Phase & was then implemented incrementally in the other phases of the education schooling system

The National Curriculum Statement for Further Education and Training (FET) was declared policy in 2004. In 2006, the NCS was implemented in Grade 10 and phased in over the next two years. In 2008 National Senior Certificate was implemented in Grade 12 for the first time.

The Regulations on the Conduct, Administration and Management of the Assessment of the National Senior Certificate determines the structure and functioning of examination systems. All examination systems must promote efficiency, reliability, validity, fairness and practicability of assessment. Clearly defined standards that are accepted and understood by all participants must be developed. Standards are the point of departure for the development of effective examination systems. Support, training and guidance is central for credible examination systems. Implementation must be accompanied by monitoring, evaluation and feedback.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXAMINATIONS: 1995 – 2008

Prior to 1995 the ex-education departments set and marked Senior Certificate examinations. From 1996 the nine provincial departments, independently, set and marked the Senior Certificate Examinations. In 2000 and 2001 the National Department of Education introduced a policy to centralize the setting of some of the examination subjects. Five National subjects were set and a timetable specifying the dates of the examinations were sent to all the Provinces. In the following year (2002), this was increased to six National Subjects. This policy remained unchanged until the end of 2005. In the following year the National Department reviewed its policy once again and increased the setting to 11 National examination subjects. This now meant that the Provinces had to ensure that the dates and times of the examinations of the 11 subjects had to be accommodated into the Provincial timetable. Finally in 2008, all question papers for all subjects were set and moderated nationally and Provinces were now provided with a National timetable.

4. THE NEW CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REGIME

The National Curriculum Statement is based on the seven Critical Outcomes (CO) and 5 Developmental Outcomes (DO), which are drawn directly from the fundamental values of the Constitution. The Learning Outcomes which are subject-specific describes the Knowledge, Skills and Values (KSVs) are to be acquired by end of Grade 12 and are drawn directly from the COs and Dos. The Assessment Standards are grade-specific and indicate the content (KSVs) to be taught to achieve each LO

In November 2008 the first final exit examination was set on the nationally set curriculum. The National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination is the final assessment that determines the success of learners that entered the FET phase at Gr. 10 in 2006. All question papers utilised in the NSC examination are national question papers written across all provinces at the same time. Candidates offer seven (7) subjects, namely, one official language at Home Language level, one official language at First Additional Level, Mathematics or Mathematical Literacy, Life Orientation and 3 other subjects. Life Orientation is assessed at school level with no external examination. All other subjects have an external examination component and a compulsory school based assessment (SBA) mark that counts 25% of final mark. To obtain the National Senior Certificate a learner must achieve 40% in three subjects, one of which is an official language at Home Language level, and 30% in three other subjects. Over and above the basic requirements Higher Education Institution may determine additional faculty requirements. All further studies require a pass in NSC.

The National Protocol on Assessment are guidelines on reporting and recording assessment .The Subject Assessment Guidelines are guidelines on subject specific requirements for assessment.

The new curriculum is very specific about the assessment requirements which are listed per subject. The table below provides the formal assessment requirements for grade 12

Allocation of tasks which make up Programme of Assessment in Grade 12

SUBJECTS	TERM 1	TERM 2	TERM 3	TERM 4	TOTAL
Language 1:5 Home Language	5 *	4 *			14
Language 2: Choice of HL or 5	5 *	4 *			14
FAL HL FAL	5	5 *	4 *		14
Life Orientation	1	2	2		5
Mathematics or 3 Maths Literacy	2 *	2 *			7
Subject choice 1 2 **	2 *	(2 *) 3 *			(6 #) 7
Subject choice 2 2 **	2 *	(2 *) 3 *			(6 #) 7
Subject choice 3 2	2 *	(2 *) 3 *			(6 #) 7

5. CHALLENGES RELATING TO ASSESSMENT

The following are some of the more serious challenges confronting the implementation of assessment and specifically with regard to the new curriculum, in South Africa:

Standards

The development of clearly defined standards for examinations is essential. A Standard is an elusive concept. Standards are a part of our every day thinking. Reeves, (2002: xv) maintains that “standards are not implemented with legislations or resolution. The ultimate success of academic standards depends on effective educational leadership and commitment. As individual we are making judgments all the time. These judgments are

made against a standard. The Oxford Dictionary definition: “degree of excellence required for a particular purpose; a measure of what is adequate; and a socially or practically described level of performance.” Standards are simply what students should know and be able to do, usually by a designated grade level” (Wright and Wright, 2003: 12).

Despite the inclusion of Learning outcomes and assessment standards in the design of the new curriculum statements, the standards are still not clearly articulated and defined. These assessment standards as they are currently articulated are read and interpreted differently by teachers and managers. This results in different standards being applied at different schools.

Teacher Competency

Teachers are the key implementers of assessment. They are expected to accurately interpret policy on assessment and construct assessment tasks that are of the required standard. The assessment tasks must be administered in accordance with the conditions prescribed for the task. Furthermore teachers have to accurately assess the evidence presented by the learners and provide the required feedback. Teachers therefore must be suitably qualified and appropriately trained to execute their tasks in a manner that will ensure high quality assessments that are fair and reliable.

With the implementation of the new curriculum, teachers have not been fully trained. Short workshop sessions were not adequate to fully capacitate teachers to deal with the new assessment requirements.

Resources

The disparate resource levels across Provinces based on their previous history is a huge challenge which affects the quality of assessment. Resources relate to the physical, material, human, financial, technological means that are available to an institution to ensure that the desired outputs are achieved. In the case of assessment, resources will relate to all the material resources i.e. learning and teaching support material (LTSM), which includes textbooks, reference material available in the school resource centre and

any other material that may be provided by the teacher or accessed by learners inside or outside the classroom, equipment and facilities.

Feedback

One of the most important functions of assessment is to diagnose learner weaknesses, with a view to developing remedial strategies. Teachers lack the necessary skills to conduct diagnostic assessment and to provide feedback to learners. This therefore undermines one of the fundamental roles of assessment which must not be viewed as an end in itself.

Seven levels of competence have been described for each subject in the Subject Assessment Guidelines. These descriptions will assist teachers to assess learners and grade them at the correct level. This approach to assessment is a new development in the assessment programme, which is in keeping with a more criterion referenced form of assessment. The various achievement levels and their corresponding percentage bands are as shown in table below. Teachers/examiners may either work from mark allocation/percentages to rating codes, or from rating codes to percentages.

Scale of achievement for recording and reporting

RATING CODE	RATING	MARKS %
7	Outstanding achievement	80 – 100
6	Meritorious achievement	70 – 79
5	Substantial achievement	60 – 69
4	Adequate achievement	50 – 59
3	Moderate achievement	40 – 49
2	Elementary achievement	30 – 39
1	Not achieved	0 – 29

Teachers are not confident in assessing learners based on this new grading scale and where judgments are made, teachers are not able to adequately defend their decisions, hence feedback to learners becomes problematic.

Examination System

The introduction of the new curriculum required the review of the current examination systems and processes to cater for the demands of the new curriculum. This also entailed the development of a new computer system (information technology) for the administration of the examination. This includes, processing and resulting of candidate's marks. An important difference compared to the previous curriculum, is that the NSC is a three year curriculum which implies that learner performance must be tracked from grades 10 to grade 12. Further SBA is a compulsory component of the final assessment which must also be recorded from grade 10 to grade 12. These entailed system and process changes which posed a great challenge to the national and provincial departments of education.

6. SUPPORT STRATEGIES: IMPROVEMENT OF ASSESSMENT QUALITY

In response to the challenges relating to the implementation of a new curriculum, the following support strategies were put in place to assist towards the improvement of the quality of assessment:

Assessment instruments

All grade 12 question papers were nationally set and there was ongoing training of examiners and internal moderators to ensure that the quality and standards were maintained.. The grade 12 exemplars that were sent to the schools were benchmarked by Cambridge International Exams (CIE), SQA and NSW.. Guidelines for the setting of question papers were distributed to all schools and the provincial co-ordination and regular monitoring and support was intensified.

Examination administration

With regard to examination administration, the following was implemented:

- issuing of guidelines for the setting of Question papers, the monitoring and the marking of Examinations.
- provincial co-ordination and regular monitoring and support
- establishment of the National Examination Board
- effective functioning of the NEIC and the PEICs
- establishment of the District and School Assessment Irregularities Committee.

Marking

With respect to marking, the memo discussions were hosted nationally. Pre-marking of representative sample of learners' scripts was introduced. Exemplars of learner performance were published. The evaluation of the marking guidelines and question papers were conducted by the provinces prior to memo discussions.

In addition chief markers were trained nationally and this training was cascaded to provincial departments. Moderation was also conducted at site level by the DoE.

School Based Assessment (SBA)

Provinces had taken the responsibility to develop guidelines for SBA and to strengthen their internal moderation systems. With the introduction of Life Orientation, provinces developed a model for the moderation of Life Orientation.

The feedback from examinations

To improve feedback to the system, the following was implemented:

- Analytical reports developed during the marking process.
- Chief Markers reports also emanating from the marking process
- Internal Moderators reports

7. SUPPORT STRATEGIES: IMPROVEMENT OF LEARNER PERFORMANCE

The National Strategy for Learner Attainment focuses on the following key areas:

- Raising the performance of schools that have scored an overall pass rate of below 60% in Grade 12;
- Improving the quality of learner attainment in all schools (gateway subjects)
- Improving the overall performance across all schools
- Ensuring that all learners in the system have a fair chance to succeed
- Reducing and eventually eliminating underperformance below 20%.

In order to give effect to these targets sets by the DoE, the following was the strategy employed:

- Provincial co-ordination and leadership of the national strategy for learner attainment was improved.
- Provinces develop provincial improvement plans, aligned to the NSLA priorities
- Provincial improvement plans forms the basis for the development of district improvement plans and school improvement plans.
- Each school was required to draft a school improvement plan, after consultation with the key stakeholders, based on the specific needs of the schools

Specific Improvement Initiatives such as management training, resourcing of schools, teacher development programmes, common examinations and accelerated programme for Language, Literacy and Communication. Some of more specific interventions relating to these initiatives are detailed below

Resources

Substantive investment has been made in the provision of resources to schools based on specific allocations and the special grants. In terms of LTSM: all learner in grade 12 should have 7 textbooks. In addition it must be ensured that educators are deployed and utilized according to subject/Learning Area of specialisation in such a manner so as to benefit the learner.

Teaching and Learning

Educators must have all policy documents and preparation records to ensure that effective teaching and learners takes place. Evidence of teacher readiness to teach all lessons on a daily basis is to be monitored and approved by the HoD or delegated SMT member. Learners must have relevant written work in their books on a daily basis. These books must be marked daily and developmental comments must be included for the learners. Completion of work schedules must be strictly complied with. In the case of Gr. 12s all sections of the work schedule must be completed as indicated by the end of June. Evidence of diagnostic analysis and remediation programs must be provided by educators for all assessment tasks.

Curriculum Management

All members of the SMT must hold monthly subject/Learning Area meetings with educators in their respective departments. The discussion should revolve around enhancing learner performance. All members of the SMT must ensure that the educators in their departments have the necessary documents as outlined above. The school must put in place a supervision programme for SMT members to monitor the work of learners and educators. This must include: checking of educator records, learner documents and classroom observation. Each of the above must be recorded, clearly identifying areas of weakness/strengths/ good practice and in the case of weaknesses clear recommendations to improve teaching and learning. This is to be done outside of IQMS. The completion of work as per work schedule must be monitored monthly. Teachers must attend all cluster meetings scheduled at district level.

Leadership and Management

All schools are to have functional timetable aligned to policy requirement for each class and teacher. Timetable for utilization of specialist rooms is to be available for each specialist room. SMT members must ensure that all learners and educators attend school regularly and punctually. Both learner and educator attendance must be monitored and the data must be given to the IDSO on a weekly basis. Monthly progress reports on efforts made to improve teacher and learner attendance is to be sent to the district office.

CONCLUSION

The GDE has made great strides in developing the examination and assessment systems to ensure quality assurance. Raising educational performance across all schools is a long-term, systemic effort. High standards are reinforced in the curriculum, teacher training, instructional materials and assessment practices. However greater effort must be made to enhance current initiatives in monitoring and evaluating the inputs and the processes as identified earlier in this presentation. School Management Teams as part of their responsibility to manage the curriculum must begin to focus on the inputs and process to enhance learner performance. We need to as a cohesive unit work together to enhance the quality of output of the system. Monitoring and evaluation and reporting across the system must be intensified. Educators are encouraged to continue persevering to enhance learner performance in the system by creating and maintaining appropriate learning environments in which learners can excel.

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